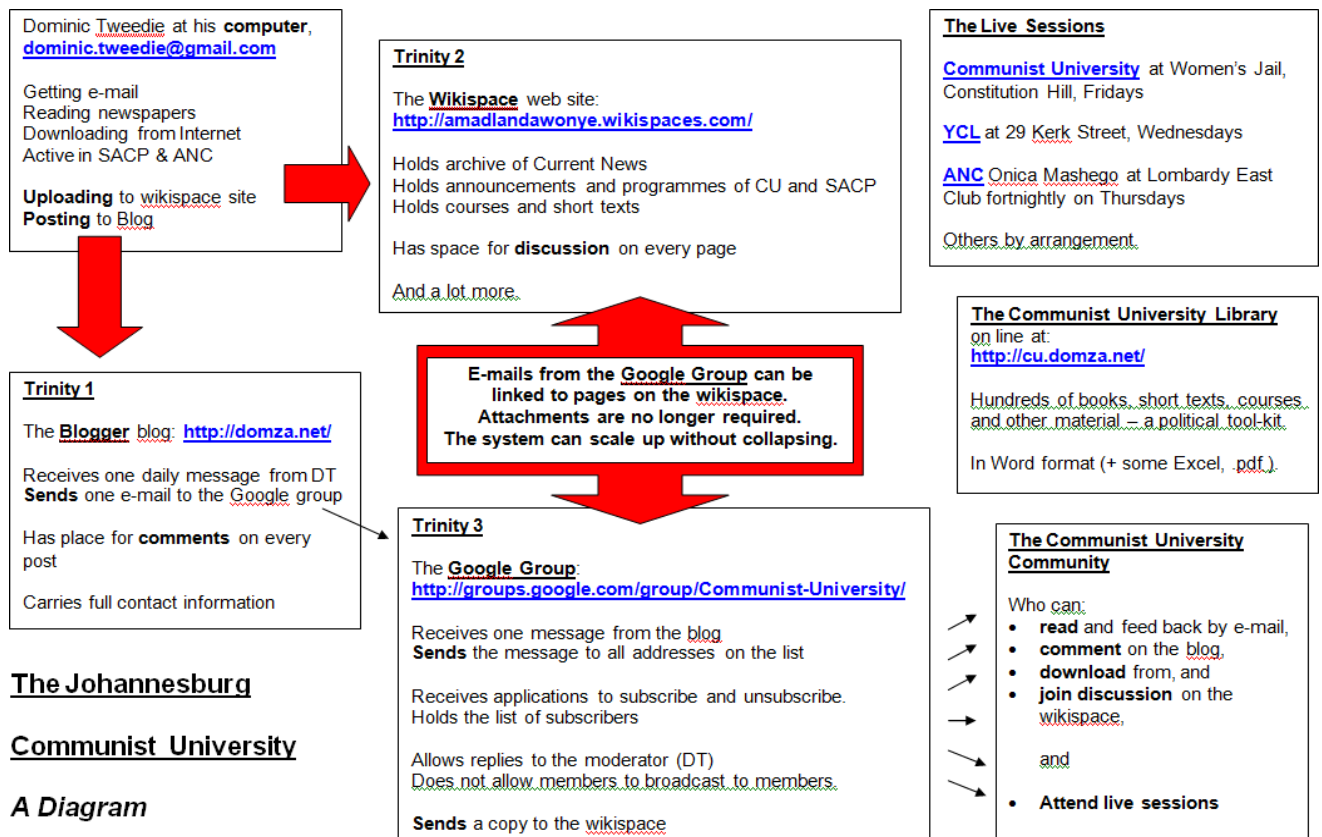


Agitprop, Part 4



Communist University Mash, 2005

Google Groups, Blogs, Web sites

The above diagram was done in 2005 to help its maker to understand and explain what we were doing in those days. This was when many new and free-to-use facilities became available in very usable and connectable forms. Many of these came from Google. They were technically stable and reliable.

We discovered the term “mash” later. It means a combination of different services, connected together to produce a very powerful “ensemble”, essentially allowing all the powers of the Internet to be mobilised by individuals. These services were e-mail distribution groups/forums; blogs; free web sites; and wikis:

E-mail distribution groups and forums (Listserve; [Electronic mailing lists](#))

Familiar ones are Google Groups and Yahoo Groups. This message came to you through a Google Group. E-mail can be distributed in bulk with one message. Groups can be set to allow all subscribers to post, in which case they become discussion forums, like this one.

Blogs

“[Blog](#)” is short for “Web log”, meaning a web site that records text in a vertical, scrolling log, or diary. The CU uses blogs to archive these introductory e-mails. Blogs have facility for comments. But the comments do not work for the CU. What works for us is e-mail.

Web sites

Free web sites became available that were easy to operate, in a similar way to using a word processor. Google Sites is one. These are good for archiving.

Wikis

Wikis are web sites that are optimised for collaborative working between two or more members of the site. Each member is jointly and severally the master of the site and can edit it at will. There are checks. The principal one is that all edits can be reversed to the previous condition. Wikis work extremely well when people want to do it. Wikipedia is the best-known example of a successful Wiki. But the Communist University has not been able to get people working together in this way. What works for us is e-mail.

It is not correct to say that the services upon which the “mash” combinations were based were “free”, or are “free” now. The value that goes in to them is created by the users, in hundreds and thousands of hours of work. This value can be taken away at any time, and this has happened to parts of the CU system. Google services are technically stable but are ultimately not reliable, because they can be withdrawn at any time, at the whim of Google.

There have been some changes to our CU arrangements, but the main outline has not changed. The Communist University is

still a combination of e-mail; archiving including web site and blog; extending out to hard copy; and to live sessions.

The Rise and Fall of Web 2.0

The growth of “mashing” and the use of “wikis” gave rise to a feeling that something new was going on, and this led to the increased use of the term “[Web 2.0](#)”. The idea that Web 2.0 is substantively different from prior web technologies has been challenged. Wikipedia quotes World Wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee, who describes the term as “jargon”. His original vision of the Web, he says was "a collaborative medium, a place where we [could] all meet and read and write".

It must be true that “Web 2.0” did not represent a change in the nature of the Internet, but by the same argument, if there has been a subsequent decline in Web 2.0, then it represents a degradation of the Internet, because the two are essentially the same.

One part of the decline in Web 2.0 is the adjustment of the services by the service providers, such as Google. They can do this unilaterally, because the user has no contract, so long as the user is getting the service free.

The Communist University lost a lot of value when the Google Groups dropped “Pages” and “Files”, about four years ago. Google Groups became even more “funky” again last year.

It is possible to make your own “listserve” to send out mass e-mail, but it is not free. Likewise with your own web sites.

So the days when it was easy are over for the moment. This means that the huge mass of people that were, around the year 2005, surging on to the content-producer side of the web, have been diverted.

Where did they go?

Facebook and Twitter

We will come back to the so-called “social networking” phenomenon later in this part, to consider whether it can be used for Agitprop, or whether, on the contrary, it is designed to prevent Agitprop from happening.

What we can note at this point is that Facebook and Twitter, and a few rather less successful “social networking” facilities, did in fact reverse the growth of creative self-publishing, and what we could call in a political sense “agency” on the World Wide Web.

Using Facebook or Twitter is qualitatively different from “mashing” your own communications. Marshall McLuhan’s famous saying, “The medium is the message,” applies. These social networks impose a uniformity of social communication that is massive, and never revolutionary, or even non-conformist.

PRISM

The revelations coming from the USA about the collection of data from all sources, including the “social networking”

services, are shocking but not surprising. They show that the idea of the World Wide Web in particular becoming an executive vehicle for revolutionary agitation is practically inconceivable. Even the extent to which it can continue as a vehicle for propaganda, in the political-education sense that is the subject-matter of this course, is uncertain.

We have to go on, and to continue to use all possible means, but we should also preserve things in the form that they have been preserved for centuries, which is the way that we now refer to as “hard copy”, meaning books and other print-on-paper media.

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